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Mini Essays: Essay 2 & Essay 3

Essay 2: Electronic/Digital Media and Teens

The Internet has become a staple in our everyday lives. We have a whole wealth of information right at our fingertips that we can access. “Research that once required days in the stacks or periodical rooms of libraries can now be done in minutes” (Carr, 2008). We can now Google pretty much anything we want to find and updating ourselves on current events takes only minutes with websites such as Yahoo, AOL, or any new source’s online publication. So does the way users read and acquire information online affecting the way we learn to think? Nicholas Carr states that “thanks to the ubiquity of text on the Internet, not to mention the popularity of text-messaging on cell phones, we may well be reading more today than we did in the 1970s or 1980s, when television was our medium of choice. But it’s a different kind of reading, and behind it lies a different kind of thinking—perhaps even a new sense of self” (Carr, 2008). Carr, in his article “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” takes a look at the Internet and how it changes the way we think. Carr wonders if the Internet is taking away our ability to concentrate on long print text and if the format and type of text on the Internet is changing the way our brains work. With Carr’s thoughts in mind we begin to wonder how the Internet will affect some of its most frequent and consistent users—teenagers.

In today’s society, teenagers are embracing new technologies almost daily. This means that literacy is no longer just about reading and writing. “Generations Y and Z are children of the Information Age” (Dimopoulos, 2008). This has become the age of video games, laptops, digital

cameras, iPods, mobile phones and the Internet; an era where a BlackBerry is not a fruit, but a pocket-sized, multi-functional communication device (Dimopoulos, 2008). Within the past decade, teenagers use of the computer has risen and in “developed countries, 94 percent of students now have at least one computer at home, compared to 72 percent in 2000” (How the Internet, 2012). As well, in a Sensis eBusiness Report it was shown that “14 to 17year-olds are the heaviest users of social networking websites such as MySpace, Facebook, Bebo, Hi5 and Friendster, with 91 percent using them to create a ‘profile’” (Dimopoulos, 2008). The Kaiser Family Foundation also found in their study that nearly half of the representative 8 to 18 year olds pulled used the Internet on a typical day, with the average time spent online to be around one hour and 41 minutes (Rich, 2008). Teenagers are spending their time checking their email, updating their social networking sites, instant messaging, watching videos on YouTube, playing on role-playing sites, as well as reading, writing , and commenting on stories on websites such as quizilla.com and fanfiction.net (Rich, 2008). Here within all these new medias lies the “debate about just what it means to read in the digital age” (Rich, 2008).

With teenagers’ scores declining on standardized tests, especially in the reading portions, there are many who believe that hours spent on the Internet is not actually beneficial to building literacy skills. “Some traditionalists warn that digital reading is the intellectual equivalent of empty calories. Zigzagging through a cornucopia of words, pictures, video and sounds, they say, distracts more than strengthens readers” (Rich, 2008). Carr feels that what the “Net seems to be doing is chipping away [his] capacity for concentration and contemplation” (Carr, 2008). There is a worry that the Internet will rob developing readers of crucial literary skills. That reading short blurbs from internet articles does not give readers the same benefits that reading a book does. Digital and electronic media has also invented a new form of language among teenagers.

The use of “text speech” or “lolspeak” has teenagers speaking in acronyms and the use of proper grammar, including capitalization of words and proper punctuation is not needed. The use of this slang language in school essays has parents and teachers worried that the Internet is in fact corrupting teenagers’ minds and damaging their literacy skills (Dimopoulos, 2008). However, is the Internet and ever-increasing use of electronic media really that bad for teenagers’ minds? Isn’t reading anything, better than reading nothing at all?

In a YouTube presentation by anthropologist Michal Wesch, a student holds up a sign that reads “I will read 8 books this year. 2,300 webpages. 1, 281 Facebook Profiles.” Fifteen year old Nadia regularly reads stories that are 45 web pages long as well as writing her own stories on fanfiction.net. Zachary Sims reads articles about technology or politics on up to 100 web sites a night (Rich, 2008). Both Nadia and Zachary are reading a great deal of information in their spare time. They also both express a fondness for being able to interact with the information they read. Zachary likes to be able to quickly find different points of view and discuss what he is reading with others online. Nadia likes that the stories she reads are not set in stone, like they are with books. Readers who comment on stories have the ability to change the outcome of what happens and interact directly with the text (Rich, 2008). While it may take a lot of time for teenagers to read one 400 page book, it takes far less time for them to read about a topic from many different views points with the Internet. “Web proponents believe that strong readers on the Web may eventually surpass those who rely on books. Reading five Web sites, an op-ed article and blog post or two, experts say, can be more enriching than reading one book” (Rich, 2008).

The use of electronic media and how teenagers interact with narrative is in fact creating new kind of “literacies.” These new ways of interacting with narrative allow readers to not only interact with the text but compose their own beginnings, middles and ends. Rand J. Spiro writes

that “young people aren’t as troubled as some of us older folks are by reading that doesn’t go in a line.” He feels that this in fact is a good thing because the “world doesn’t go in a line, and the world isn’t organized into separate compartments or chapters” (Rich, 2008). Additionally, learning to locate information quickly and accurately on the Internet is in fact a cognitively demanding skill and requires the use of digital literacy skills that are becoming more and more favorable in today’s job market. It has reached a point where reading should be redefined. “Interpreting videos or pictures...may be as important a skill as analyzing a novel or a poem” (Rich, 2008). As Donna E. Alvermann, a professor of language and literacy education states, “Kids are using sound and images so they have a world of ideas to put together that aren’t necessarily language oriented. Books aren’t out of the picture, but they’re only one way of experiencing information in the world today” (Rich, 2008).

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Essay 3: Essay a Controversial Book

“No matter what you do...never let any little boy break your heart. Never give anything away without a good reason” (Tyree 40). This was the advice Tracy Ellison was given by her mother when she was six years old; advice that she would later understand and take to heart. *Flyy Girl*, by Omar Tyree, is an African American coming of age story of Tracy Ellison and her closest friends. The story starts at Tracy’s sixth birthday, in 1977, and follows her until her first year of college. The story shows the up downs of Tracy’s life and the relationships she has while living in a middle class neighborhood of Philadelphia. Through the eyes of Tracy and her friends, the reader sees how materialistic the world is and how if you are smart, manipulative and pretty you can get anything you want. By the age of 10 Tracy is already boy crazy and spends the next seven years of her life gaining the attention of boys and using them to gain status, a powerful reputation, and presents. Tracy eventually finds herself maturing; gaining new found respect for her neighbor Raheema (who spends most of her young teenage years avoiding boys) and going to college with a less cavalier attitude about relationships, love, boys and sex.

This book, published in 1993, has been the subject of controversy over the years. The book, while often marketed for young adults, is seen as not being age appropriate for teenagers. The use of foul language and graphic sex scenes have been issues raised about the book. The foul language is rampant and is used consistently throughout the story. The book is also almost solely based around sex and how sex is used to manipulate people. Tracy has her first kiss when she is 10 years old and her first sexual experience when she is 13 years old. While there are a couple of female characters who refrain from sex most girls in the story, including the main character Tracy, are using sex to gain power or are too immature to realize they are being used. The boys and young men of the story are all shown as sex hungry and have very little respect for the

opposite gender. While the sex in the book is purposely written to highlight the awkwardness and clumsiness of sex (especially between those too young and inexperienced to be having sex), it is often graphic and depicts very little emotional or physical consequences. The sex is also not just among minors, as Tracy has more than one relationship with young men who are around 18 to 19 years of age, while she is still a young teenager.

The shock factor of this book is not only capable of stirring up controversy, but also bringing in an audience. The book's shock factors regarding sex, language and drug references could be a pull to teens and is entertaining. Tracy and her friends are teenagers with flaws and have complicated and sometimes painful family lives that can be related to. Tracy's father comes in and out of her life and she finds her home life unstable for many years. Additionally, the book highlights the often intense pressures to be mature, independent and popular and Tracy lives a life in which she is allowed a lot of freedom at home and has a well known reputation that makes her very popular among boys. The book also shows the difficulties of teenage romances and the stigma and uncertainties about sex and love. There are many teenage girls who find themselves a little boy crazy and in on-again-off-again relationships that could find Tracy's and her friends' stories relatable. While these factors worked for the book, and can make the story enjoyable for teenagers, there are many factors that did not work and could be possible deterrents for a teenage audience.

To start with, the book is long at 447 pages. While it focuses on teenagers and their lives, it spends a lot time with Tracy being young between the ages of 6 and 10 years old. This part of the book, while does its part to establish Tracy's family life and what she grows up surround by, it is long and drags out. Patience will be required to get to the more interesting parts of the story, as well as getting through all 447 pages. Also, while the author tells the story mostly through

Tracy's eyes, he jumps occasionally to other characters. These characters are used to further the story and give alternate perspectives, but they are not really given very much space in the story to really bond with or understand. As well, with the regards to the sex described in the book, it seems to be unnecessarily graphic at times and rarely considers the emotional consequences of sexual relationships. Tracy is aware of the consequences of sex, but the story rarely dives deeper than a superficial understanding of what sex is and a desire to not be considered a slut. Instead, the story spends a great deal of time focusing on manipulative, unhealthy relationships and how Tracy uses these to get everything she wants. In the end, the book does have Tracy recognize her destructive behavior and show her attempts to grow up. However, this is done at the end of the book and is rushed through and does not allow for much insight into her sudden maturity.

In looking at what worked and didn't work for the book and how these factors would come across to a teenage audience, I would not order this book for my library's YA collection. If the library did not already contain this book, I would not go out of my way to find it and include it. The book uses a lot of early eighties culture and hip hop references that will more than likely be lost on teenagers today. The book is outdated, long, and focuses mostly on being boy crazy. While it can be relatable to teens, there are other, more recently written and relevant books in this genre to take its place. However, if this book was already in my YA collection I would not remove it. Even though the book has had some controversy it is still a strong story, has the potential to be relatable and would not warrant removal.

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